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CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Day the Mail Did Not Go

000 At four o'clock one morning I was awakened by a loud pounding on my bedroom door. Miss Goenawein was calling excitedly, "Miss Gregg! Miss Gregg! Come here—hurry!"

I sprang out of bed, shoved my feet into slippers, pulled on a robe and ran to her room. There in the open doorway stood Spoonhead, the mail carrier, the mail pouch clutched in his hand. His long, queer head looked more than ever like the bowl of a spoon as I stared at him, wondering what mischief he had cooked up to get me out of bed at this hour.

484 His pony stood in the yard, bridle rein dangling. The saddle
674 was decorated like a Christmas tree with Spoonhead's numerous bundles: food for himself and his horse, extra clothing for the cold nights on the mesa, and those mysterious knickknacks he took on such trips. I did not notice the absence of the large, red Navaho blanket he always carried neatly rolled and strapped to the back of his saddle, until he began gesticulating wildly and shouted, "My blanket! He steal 'em. He go there." He pointed to the base of the canyon wall.

674 There I saw a short, heavy-set Indian with a blanket thrown
578 across his shoulders, crouched low, running stealthily from bush to bush, seeking cover for escape. In the dim light we caught only fleeting glimpses of the man. I could not understand why Spoonhead did not give chase and try to retrieve his property.

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"Go after him and get your blanket!" I exclaimed, almost as excited as Spoonhead was.

He did not move. Instead he was watching me brightly, sure that the Hico would settle the difficulty; why else was she here? When he realized that I had no intention of chasing the thief, his elongated face grew inches longer.

"Tell me that man's name," I said. "You know who he is."

"Plenty dark. No can see," was his naïve reply.

Later, I learned his reason for evasion. If he betrayed the thief, he would betray himself. Spoonhead wanted his blanket but with no questions asked. He had no intention of catching the thief, and when he made up his mind that I had none, he said, "No take mail. No go. Got no blanket. Plenty cold up there." He dropped the mail pouch to the floor.

"Get on your horse. The mail must go," I told him. "I'll get you a blanket."

At that moment the thief dashed from behind a boulder to a mesquite bush, and I recognized him.

"That's Walapai Bill!" I exclaimed. "You knew all the time it was he. Find Vesnor and tell him to meet me at Walapai Bill's camp. You go there with him."

In the excitement I too was forgetting the sanctity of the United States mail and the tradition that come hell or high water nothing must interfere with its transportation.

The morning still held that drabness that precedes the dawn, and the usual thick fog hung just above the ground, so I went to my room to put on warm clothing.

Like a damp thread the narrow trail wound through dense underbrush so high that it met overhead, with every leaf and twig dripping water. Along the path I caught glimpses of watching eyes that moved through the brush as I moved, but drew back and vanished when I looked directly at them. The village was astir and palpitating with the news that an old feud had flared up anew. Like curious, impetuous children the Indians peeped from bushes and doorways, unwilling to miss an instant's excitement that could

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674 578 be caught and later exaggerated to entertain relatives and friends.

Walapai Bill's house was a low mound of earth with a door in one end. He was in the yard chopping brush in short lengths for his cooking fire.

"I want Spoonhead's blanket," I told him shortly. My patience was not improved by the fact that I was cold and soaking wet.

"Didn't see blanket," he said, his graying head bent over the wood. "You look my house, you no see blanket."

I pushed open the rickety board door that hung on leather hinges and entered. The dirt floor was worn to a saucerlike depression, the sides sloping to the flat circle in the center. A search did not reveal the blanket, which was too large and too vivid in color to be concealed easily. His wife also had disappeared. I went outside as Vesnor and Spoonhead rode up on their ponies.

With his usual astuteness, Vesnor knew exactly where to find the blanket. He pursed his lips and pointed to the canyon wall. "Over there, I think," he said. "Maybe wife hide 'em in storehouse."

"Bring the woman here," I told him, "and make her bring the blanket."

He sprang through the brush, climbed the talus, and followed a trail on a shelf of rock until trees and shrubs hid him from view. The Indians crowded in, forming a half-circle about the hut, eager to see the culprit brought in.

Vesnor returned, his hard right hand firmly grasping the woman's wrist. She followed, pulling back angrily with each step, the heavy blanket across her shoulder. Her lord and master had ordered her to hide his loot in their granary and she had had no choice but to obey.

I sent the Indians home except those actually involved in the theft. I told the women to give their children food and get them ready for school, then I investigated the affair.

674 578 695 Walapai Bill's cockiness melted rapidly when he was told that he could be sent to jail for theft, and that his interfering with the transportation of the United States mail was no light matter. His

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fat shoulders slumped and his bold daring changed to indecision. He prized above all else his freedom to go where and when he pleased, so built up his defense.

"Long time ago, I go on mesa. I hunt seeds, nuts; make good food. I hunt rabbits, deer. Gone long time, maybe so many"—he held up four fingers—"moons. Come home, door all break. Somebody go in house, take saddle blanket. Little one. I think Spoonhead steal 'em. That why I steal Spoonhead blanket. He steal me, I steal him. That way Indians do. Make play like little game; little mad, too."

Spoonhead angrily met the accusation, for not all of the truth had been told, and the blame had been shifted to him. "Long time, Walapai Bill, me, gamble. He lose. One dollar. He no pay. I take blanket. Little one. Worth maybe one dollar," he shouted.

Walapai Bill sheepishly admitted the truth of Spoonhead's statement. Each of them was entirely willing to return the other's blanket for they now realized the gravity of the situation. Spoonhead went to his camp and returned with the saddle blanket which he exchanged for his big Navaho. It remained only for Walapai Bill to pay his debt of honor to wipe out the long-standing feud. Unless this were paid, the good-natured pilfering would start all over again. I suggested that he take care of it. I was not sure that he had the money; if he had, where he kept it was a mystery.

He ducked through his doorway, very reluctantly lifted a rug from the center of the floor, dropped to his knees and began digging in the dirt with both hands. He clawed out the hard-packed soil, tossing the dirt back as a dog throws it when digging a burrow. I watched his queer antics in bewilderment, amused at the concentration with which he worked. Then his pudgy, brown fingers scratched metal and he drew from the hole a rusty baking powder can, with the word "Royal" still legible on its paper cover. He twisted and turned the lid until it came free; then, fumbling around inside, he took a silver dollar from the coins in the can. He handed the dollar to me, and the woebegone look on his face told how hard was the parting. I gave the money to Spoonhead,

535 a few rude shuffles, half religious, half social — are neither representative nor picturesque, as are the cachinas or kâ-kâs of the Pueblos. "We know of these things," said Ko-hót, "but we are the children of the Coyote, and he did not teach our fathers to make themselves happy or prosperous by such means; therefore, our fathers did not teach us."

181 The Ha-va-su-paí have, among themselves, few of the crimes which destroy
● 674 the peace of most nations. A great family in a single house, they have learned to do to others as they would be done by; not as a golden rule, — ah, no! — but as a policy. They are virtuous, and, although base liars, are honest in the use of property to an incredible extent. Not the smallest possession of another is ever appropriated by one of them, and a button or insignificant bead, lost in the sands, would invariably be brought to me, if found by either child or staggering grayhead. The parents are excessively fond of their children, and the
[855 861] latter, though wild and independent, and never corrected by cross word or sharp blow, are remarkably obedient.

They are not so fair-dealing toward
648 721 the enemy. Ko-hót told me, with strange frankness, that a few years ago his people joined other Indians in war against the whites, and, regarding them as enemies, stole horses and cattle from them whenever they could, bringing them down into the cañon, where they either sacrificed them or killed and ate them.
648 177 "But," he added, "the time has come when I see this is wrong, and my people will listen to me when I tell them to smile on the *Hai-ko* [American], to ask him to eat, and to let his poorest or most tempting possession lie in the place it has been laid in; for has not the Hai-ko given to my children the hard metal and the rich garments you see all around you? [This with a proud wave of the hand toward the array of worn-out clothing in the council, and a down-